

## The evolution of a new discourse for vocational psychology

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How we think and how we talk about the work we do in vocational psychology structures, organizes and focuses this work in profound and powerful ways. To change, in any kind of fundamental way, the way we think and talk about our field has significant consequences. In this essay I would like to trace the evolution of how I have been thinking and talking about vocational psychology in the course of my professional life, delineating the major influences that have shaped the direction that my work has taken. This work can be roughly broken down into three phases characterized by changes in language and discourse: from career to work, from work to work and relationships, and the elaboration of work to refer specifically to market work and personal care work. In describing the first two of these changes below, I refer to changes having to do with language. A more explicit understanding of language as discourse becomes significant in the third phase.

### From career to work

The first phase spanned many years from my doctoral dissertation work at Teachers College, Columbia University to my paper on *Work in Peoples Lives* (Richardson, 1993), years in which, although my dissertation was on women's career development, my focus primarily turned to feminism, psychology of women, and psychoanalysis, with little emphasis on vocational psychology beyond the vocational courses I taught at New York University. The doctoral seminar in vocational development, in particular, provided the slow cooker for helping to shift my thinking from career to work, with gender consciousness, in general, the key ingredient. Other key ingredients were standpoint theory and an historical understanding of the ways in which the language of vocational choice and career development reflected the political ideology of the times. Standpoint theory, an epistemology espoused by feminist philosophers such as Harding (1991) and Haraway (1997), was critical for a generation of feminist scholars.

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According to standpoint theory, knowledge is not separate from experience. What we know is fundamentally affected by where we stand, that is, by our experience in the world. Further, and, most importantly, for feminist theorists experience differs profoundly by gender. From the perspective of standpoint theorists, theory generated by men and grounded in the male experience of the world is theory predominantly about men. What is needed is a different version of theory that fits and is rooted in women's lives. Gilligan's (1982) work on moral development exemplifies the contribution of standpoint theory to the general field of psychology. Rather than accepting a male-centered version of moral development, a standard against which women were seen as lagging in moral development, Gilligan interviewed women regarding their moral choices and delineated an alternate version of moral development that better explained the nature of moral development in women.

Standpoint theory was instrumental in enabling me to develop the position that the language of work is preferable to that of career. The observation that career development looks fundamentally different when viewed from the perspective of women's experience is an axiom of standpoint theory. What seemed most fundamentally different about women's lives is the role that expectations about their future as wives and, especially, as mothers play. From a woman's perspective, choices regarding whether or not to have children may loom as significant as, or, even more significant than what kind of career to pursue. Initially, I considered the research of my students on the narratives of married midlife women who chose not to have children (Ziehl, 1999) and on childbearing among disadvantaged Black urban teen-agers (Merrick, 2001) as research about women's career development. However, feminist writings on the extent to which the social sciences neglect and devalue care work, such as parenting, that is done predominantly by women (Abel & Nelson, 1990; Glazer, 1993), along with standpoint theory, contributed to the realization that the language of work is more inclusive of women's reality than the language of career. Many women perceive their lives' work in two different domains; one is paid work in public occupational settings, and one is unpaid work in personal and family settings. The language of work enables attention to work in both of these domains. Most importantly, it values work in both domains, while, at the same time, recognizes critical differences in these two different kinds of work. While originally construed from a woman's perspective, the relevance of care work for men's lives is increasingly apparent in a world that is radically revising gender roles.

Further contributing to a preference for the language of work rather than career was an awareness of the extent to which the construct of vocational choice was an historical artifact, an awareness fostered by Sherman (1988), also a student of mine

at NYU. Her research on the emergence of the ideology of vocational choice in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century America examined the ways in which the notion of vocational choice addressed the needs of a rapidly evolving and expanding industrial economy that had to find politically acceptable ways to channel people into the many different kinds of jobs that were becoming available. The notion of choice, however, was largely a fiction for many people, both men and women, who had to take whatever jobs were available and for whom choice was a luxury beyond their grasp.

The class bias built into vocational choice was exacerbated when vocational choice was replaced by the language of career development in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. If vocational choice was a luxury for many, the notion of a progressive and hierarchical career that developed over a lifetime was even more out of reach. Thus, in addition to the fact that the language of work is more inclusive of women's work than career, it is also preferable because it is inclusive of the occupational work of men and women with little choice and few opportunities for the kind of career progression of the more affluent.

An additional factor recommending the language of work is that it seems more amenable to a broader range of other-oriented and communal values than the language of career that disproportionately fosters self-oriented values of success and satisfaction (Baumeister & Vohs, 2005; Bellak, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1986; Dik & Duffy, 2009). People are motivated to work for reasons that extend beyond making money, getting ahead, and being satisfied with their work, a point that is fundamental to Blustein's (2006) psychology of working.

This stew of ingredients led to my paper on *Work in People's Lives* (Richardson, 1993) in which I argue that the language of work is a more inclusive and useful focus for vocational psychology than the language of career. This perspective, generated by attention to women's lives, has turned out to also more broadly encompass the lives of men, a position elaborated and advanced by Blustein (2006, 2008).

### **From work to work and relationship**

The next shift in language was from work to work and relationship. Contextualism is the key ingredient that contributed to this shift. Contextualism is a philosophical position that has radically altered the landscape of developmental theory. While not typically included as a product of social constructionism, contextualism's focus on the role of social context is in accord with the social contextualist zeitgeist of contemporary times. According to Pepper (1942), there are four basic positions

that help explain how change occurs; organicism, contextualism, mechanism, and formism. Each of these positions is potentially valid. They are, at the same time, theoretically incommensurate with one another. The most influential developmental theories of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century were grounded in organicism, a position that views change as hierarchical, linear, and progressive, resulting from basic changes arising within an organism as it matures and becomes more differentiated in its interactions with the environment. As applied to human development, organicism was the foundation for many influential stage theories of development, including such luminaries as Freud, Erikson, Levinson, and, of course, Super, in the field of vocational psychology.

In stage theories the essential unit of analysis is the individual. While stage theories take into account the influence of the environment or the context, these influences are basically secondary to the stage-based development of the new structures and functions associated with each stage. In contrast, the basic unit of analysis in contextualism, as applied to human development, is the individual interacting in social contexts. Contextualism posits that change can occur in any direction and is theoretically continuous. Thus, change is not necessarily progressive. Contextualism also upends the balance of change and stasis. Rather than a series of progressive stages punctuated by transitions from one stage to the next, continuous change becomes more normative with possibilities for both progression and regression.

Contextualism provides a foundation for considering human agency central to the developmental process. Rather than conceiving of a series of stages unfolding over time according to some a priori determined sequence of stages, developmental theories influenced by contextualism conceive of the individual as an active agent who, to a greater or a lesser extent, helps to produce or construct his or her own development through actions informed by individually-held intentions and goals (Lerner, 2006). The developmental trajectories that result are shaped by individuals as they are, in turn, influenced by the forces they encounter in the social contexts in which they participate.

Contextualism has profound implications for vocational psychology. It radically recenters the traditional emphasis on fostering career development, conceived as a part of a person or a self, to fostering the development of people through their participation in the social contexts of their lives. It shifts attention from a focus on one part of a person to a focus on the person as a whole interacting in social contexts.

Thus, contextualism is inherently holistic both with respect to its conceptions of people and of social contexts.

With respect to the person part of this interaction unit, the holism of contextualism can be more deeply understood by contrasting it to the more segmented view espoused by theory grounded in organicism. For example, a stage developmental theory focuses on one aspect of a person's development and assumes that, to some extent, this aspect of development has a separate and independent developmental line that can be observed. In contrast, contextualism is about people considered holistically taking action. While the person acting may certainly be influenced by multiple factors, both external and internal, the construct of action presumes a unitary actor who is a center of initiative.

With respect to the social context part of this interaction unit, while a person may be taking action at any one point in time in relation to a single social context, people have complex lives involving participation in multiple social contexts that are interdependent. For example, the action taken to pursue a particular line of occupational work is affected by the set of relationships in which a person is involved and their personal care work responsibilities. Thus it is necessary to have a holistic understanding of social contexts.

While the notion of social contexts can refer to brief and transitory contexts such as a party or a class, what was needed was a conceptualization of a set of major social contexts that includes the major contexts of development for most people. The language of work delineated two major contexts of work, work in occupational settings and care work. Influenced by the many developments in clinical theory (Mitchell & Aron, 1999), in feminist psychological theory (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991) and in vocational psychology (Blustein, 2001; Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004; Schultheiss, 2007) that underline the importance of relationships for developmental progression, and buttressed by a conceptualization of relationships as developmental contexts (Collins & Laursen, 1999), I delineated two major relational contexts, personal relationships in private domains of life and relationships in public occupational settings. Personal relationships include family, friends, and peers. Relationships in the context of work in occupational settings include relationships such as those with teachers, colleagues, mentors, and supervisors or bosses. In a paper advancing these ideas (Richardson, 2002), I suggest that the focus of vocational psychology should be on fostering the development of people across these four work and relationship contexts. While clearly the relationships we develop with people are closely linked to the work we

do, these contexts are best considered to be separate but overlapping social and developmental contexts.

### **The elaboration of work to specify market work and personal care work**

Discourse analysis is the most recent ingredient that has led me to specify more clearly the distinction between the two different types of work contexts (Richardson, in press, in preparation). Discourse analysis is an outgrowth of social constructionism, a philosophical position committed to healing the split between personal experience and the social world (Rorty, 1999). In psychology, this position has advanced an understanding that personal experience is a joint product of persons interacting in social worlds (Gergen, 1994, 2009; Gergen & Davis, 1985). In discourse analysis, language itself, the words we use and the grammar that structures the use of these words, is conceived of as a particularly powerful way in which the social world impacts experience (Harre, 1983, 1998). Scholars such as Foucault (1980) have been most influential in tracing the ways that language implicitly and invidiously reproduces the power hierarchies of a culture and society.

Applying the lens of discourse theory to the proposed shift in language from career to work reveals the ways in which this language challenges a prevailing and very powerful discourse in the social sciences, that is, the discourse of work and family. This discourse can be traced to Parsons and Bales (1955), who theorized that society is structured by two separate and complementary domains; the instrumental domain of work having to do with work for pay in occupational settings, and the expressive family domain where people are nurtured and supported. The productive goals of the work domain are supported by the reproductive goals of the family domain; families reproduce and care for workers who, in turn, provide economic support for the family. This very powerful theory and language is well-suited to capitalistic economies that privilege economic productivity.

The problem with this discourse is that it effectively "disappears" the care work that is done in the private domain of families (Gerstel & Gross, 1987). The marginalization of care work in this discourse echoes and reinforces the marginalization of care work in career discourse. Further, it also marginalizes the role of relationships in the public world of occupational work. It reproduces a perception that families are all about relationships and work is all about making money or economic productivity.

Despite efforts to define work as inclusive of what I have come to call market work and personal care work, the discourse of work, without the qualifiers of market work and personal care work, inevitably drifts to a focus on only one kind of work. In daily life, such is the power of work and family discourse in our collective minds that the word "work", without a qualifier, is structured by this discourse to refer solely to economically productive work or paid work. In view of this, it is necessary to qualify the kind of work we are talking about.

How to label paid work is fairly simple. Given the radical changes in contemporary times that are restructuring economies and both the kinds of work that need to be done and how it is done, the designation of market work seems most inclusive of all of the different ways that people make a living. Care work presents a more complicated problem. Although care work has traditionally referred to the care of dependent others such as children, the elderly, the sick, and disabled (Abel & Nelson, 1990), Tronto proposes an expanded definition of care work that includes the care of self, of relationships, of communities, and of the environment. Her definition considerably expands the meaning of reproduction and is more inclusive of the kind of caring necessary in contemporary times.

Care work can also be paid and unpaid. Many people work in jobs that can be considered care work and are affected by the devaluation of care work comparable to its devaluation in personal lives. In fact, feminist theorists address the interlocking and interdependent connections between the role of personal care work and paid care work for men and women in developed and developing economies (Heyman, 2006; Razari, 2007). Given these complexities, in the discourse I am proposing, it is important to distinguish personal care work from its paid market work manifestations and to clarify that personal care work includes the breadth of activities suggested by Tronto (2006, 2008).

## Reflections

This latest elaboration of a new discourse for vocational psychology, inspired by feminist and social justice values, challenges two deeply-held discourses, that of career development, and work and family. These discourses structure how we experience the world and, at the same time, contribute to reproducing this world with its privileging of economic productivity, its endemic devaluation of care work, and its neglect of the kind of work done by less privileged social groups. On the one hand, to challenge this way of thinking is daunting and, perhaps, quixotic. On the

other hand, this new discourse might be more helpful to the people we serve and, ultimately, to the social world we inhabit. It enables us to expand the parameters of our work to help people construct their lives (through social contexts) rather than develop careers. In so doing, we communicate that social engagement in work and relationships across both public and private domains of life is valued. Thus, this new discourse fosters a more complex and flexible set of social identities. By fostering and valuing multiple pathways for social engagement, it is more likely to facilitate the construction of lives of meaning and happiness in face of the instability and discontinuities that increasingly roil our lives, especially in the contexts of market work. Ultimately, this new discourse embeds traditional career discourse in a broader and more comprehensive discourse about life opportunities and reorients it to be inclusive of and to value both market work and personal care work.

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### **Resumo**

Este artigo, discutindo acerca de questões próprias da psicologia vocacional, reflete o percurso que a autora realizou ao longo da sua vida profissional. Esta reflexão perpassa três fases caracterizadas por três mudanças de linguagem e dos discursos: de carreira para trabalho; de trabalho para trabalho e relação; e da associação estreita entre a ideia de trabalho ligada especificamente ao Mercado de trabalho e o trabalho pessoal. São apresentadas, nessa sequência, as alterações que decorrem de cada uma das fases atrás enumeradas.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Psicologia vocacional, Mudanças na linguagem e no discurso, Da carreira ao trabalho, Do trabalho ao trabalho e relação, Mercado de trabalho, Trabalho individual.

### **Abstract**

This paper traces the evolution of the ways in which I have been thinking and talking about vocational psychology in the course of my professional life. This evolution has proceeded through three phases characterized by three changes in language and discourse; from career to work, from work to work and relationship, and the elaboration of work to refer specifically to market work and personal care work. Implications of these changes are addressed.

**KEY-WORDS:** Vocational psychology, Changes in language and discourse, From career to work, From work to work and relationship, Market work, Personal care work.